

# Factors Associated with Intention to Report Child Abuse among Early Childcare Providers in North-eastern Preschools, Malaysia

Ja'afar SM<sup>a</sup>, Arifin WN<sup>b</sup>, Ab Rahman A<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Community Medicine, School of Medical Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian, Kelantan, Malaysia.

<sup>b</sup>Biostatistics and Research Methodology Unit, School of Medical Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Kubang Kerian, Kelantan, Malaysia.

## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** Despite the rising number of child abuse in Malaysia, there are only few studies documenting early childcare providers' (ECPs') intention to report child abuse. ECPs play a vital impact because they closely interact with the children and nearly daily observe them. They should take the lead in ending the cycle of abuse in order to safeguard the children. The aim of our study was to determine the factors that influence ECPs' intentions to report child abuse. **MATERIALS AND METHOD:** 457 ECPs working in preschools registered under the Community Development Department in Kelantan, the North-eastern part of peninsular Malaysia participated in a cross-sectional study utilising the Early Childhood Educators Child Abuse Questionnaire (ECECAQ) in Malay, which has been validated. **RESULTS:** Increasing knowledge was significantly associated with the intention to report to the authorities as revealed by multiple logistic regression. **CONCLUSION:** Our findings justify the need for a comprehensive module and integrated standardized training on child abuse for ECPs in Malaysia to improve their knowledge, thus empowering them to report any child abuse case.

## Keywords

child abuse, childcare providers, intention to report, associated factors

## Corresponding Author

Assoc. Prof. Dr Azriani Ab Rahman  
Department of Community Medicine,  
School of Medical Sciences,  
Universiti Sains Malaysia,  
16150 Kubang Kerian, Kelantan, Malaysia

E-mail : azriani@usm.my

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## INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, parents or other carers regularly abuse every three out of four children between the ages of two and four.<sup>1</sup> Younger children are often the victims of abuse.<sup>2,3,4</sup> The ability to detect any features of child abuse is crucial for people who interact closely with children, such as childcare providers, because, the victims do not even understand that it is wrong and abusive at such a young age.<sup>5</sup>

Several studies have reported that child care providers lack sufficient knowledge about child abuse and the procedure for reporting.<sup>3,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13</sup> Even with thorough knowledge, the desire to report a possible incident of child abuse is another matter. Other factors, such as lack of support from the employer or the school administrator, fear of tarnishing the relationship with the child's family, fear of misreading the family's parenting or disciplinary style, and lack of trust in the authorities deter people from reporting.<sup>9,14,15</sup>

In Malaysia, according to a research done in one of the tertiary hospitals, the number of reported cases of child abuse and neglect over the past five years has remarkably increased by threefold.<sup>16</sup> A total of 6,144 cases of children in need of care and protection were recorded in 2021 in which 147 cases were reported in Kelantan.<sup>17</sup> Less than one percent of cases were brought to the attention of the authority. Therefore it's possible that the number of cases is underestimated, most probably because of not reported.<sup>18</sup> This reluctance to report might also be related to a silence-community culture.<sup>8</sup> Law requires early childcare providers (ECPs) to report any case of child abuse.<sup>19</sup> Since the ECPs interact closely with the children and see them every day, they ought to be the ones to interrupt the cycle of abuse.

Studies in Malaysia examining the factors associated with intention to report a case of child abuse among ECPs are few. The majority of previous studies emphasised on the

background of abuse victims.<sup>6,8</sup> Therefore, this study aims to present other dimensions of evidence on child abuse. The objective of our study was to determine the factors associated with the ECPs' intention to report child abuse.

## **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

### **Study Design, Participants, and sample size**

A cross-sectional study was performed among ECPs working at preschools under the Kelantan Community Development Department (CDD) in eight districts of Kelantan, a North-eastern state in peninsular Malaysia. The inclusion criteria were those participants who understood Malay and had been working at the current preschools for a minimum period of six months. Using a single proportion formula, the estimated samples required were 474 participants utilising 5% precision and percentage of intention to report by the previous study.<sup>9</sup> No sampling method was applied. All eligible ECPs were selected because the number of available ECPs and the number of required samples was roughly equal.

### **Assessment tool and data collection**

This study used the self-administrated validated Malay version of 'Early Childhood Educators Child Abuse Questionnaire' (ECECAQ). It consists of six parts: personal information, reporting of child abuse, education, and training, attitude/personal belief, knowledge, and vignettes.

The 17 items in the knowledge section were divided into three categories: general knowledge on child abuse, knowledge related to law, and knowledge related to reporting of child abuse. They are scored based on the number of correct responses per item. Each correct response received a score of 1, and an incorrect response received a score of 0.

Four factors in the attitude section include perception towards child abuse, features of child abuse, support system towards reporting, and responsibility towards reporting. The items are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly

disagree). Negatively phrased items were scored in reverse, with a higher score denoting a good attitude and a lower score denoting a poor attitude.

The vignette section represents the intention to report. There are four scenarios that point to neglect, physical, and sexual abuse. Six response options were presented to respondents to indicate how they intended to report. A "report to authority" response was taken to mean that the respondent intended to report, but other replies were taken to mean otherwise. Other responses include 'report to school administration', 'defer the decision to report to school administration', 'wait for more convincing signs of abuse', 'speak to parents or stepfather', and 'don't report, take no action'.

Prior to this study, the original questionnaire was translated and culturally adapted into Malay using the recommended guidelines.<sup>9,20</sup> Two independent bilingual Malay and English experts performed the forward and backward translations. Professionals with extensive knowledge in the subject evaluated, compared, and harmonised the Malay version of ECECAQ. Then it was validated among 218 ECPs who were not involved in the actual study. The five-point Likert-scaled attitude items were analysed by confirmatory factor analysis, while the dichotomous-scaled knowledge items were analysed using 2-parameter logistic item response theory analysis. It showed good validity and reliability. The four-factor model for the attitude had good fit ( $\chi^2=58.7$  (48),  $P=0.138$ ; SRMR=0.044; RMSEA=0.033; CFI=0.986; TLI=0.981), with factor loadings ranging from 0.414 to 0.869 and good reliability (Raykov's rho ranging from 0.672 to 0.878). The knowledge had good difficulty and discrimination values, with acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.66).

For data collection, the ECPs who agreed and gave written consents were gathered and informed about the objective and the questionnaire of the study. The researchers also assured ethical concerns and answered any queries that were raised. Regarding ethical concern, although there were two questions asking on personal experience of reporting child abuse, the questionnaire

booklet was returned as anonymous, thus the respondent could not be identified.

### Statistical analysis

Data was entered and analysed utilising IBM statistic software version 24. To evaluate the factors associated with the intention to report child abuse, simple and multiple binary logistic regression was used. In our study, intention to report was defined as “yes” if the respondent selected "yes" in at least one of the vignettes when asked to "report to the authority". Two-tailed  $p < 0.05$  was used as the significant level.

## RESULTS

### Socio-demography characteristics of ECPs

Of the 539 available ECPs, 491 respondents took part in this study. Only 457 respondents remained after 34 respondents' data from incomplete responses were excluded from the analysis. The response rate was 84.8%. The majority of them were Malay women, and their mean age was 41.8 (SD: 11.5). Most of them had successfully completed their tertiary education. A total of 41.1% of them had been employed in this sector for more than 20 years; and 89.5% of them were in charge of children between the ages of five and six. Only one respondent (0.2%) had ever reported to the authorities a case of child abuse. Less than 20% of them had training on child abuse. Among those who had attended training on child abuse, the majority of them (93.3%) had less than 10 hours of training each year. Many of them (84.0%) received professional development training (PDT). Of the 78.4% of those who attended the PDT stated it helped them to handle situations of child abuse. (Table 1).

### Intention to report suspected case of child abuse among ECPs in Kelantan

Overall, 190 (41.6%) respondents intended to report the situations of child abuse to the authority (Table 2). The intention was calculated from the answer ‘yes’ given by the respondents for ‘report to the authority’ response in at least one of the vignettes (Table 3).

When respondents were shown the first vignette, in which a girl said that her stepfather had touched her genitalia,

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristic of ECPs (n=457)

| Variables  | Mean (SD)  | n   | (%)    |
|--|------------|-----|--------|
| Age (years)  | 41.8(11.5) |     |        |
| <b>Gender</b>  |            |     |        |
| Male   |            | 2   | (0.4)  |
| Female   |            | 455 | (99.6) |
| <b>Race</b>  |            |     | (99.3) |
| Malay  |            | 454 | (0.7)  |
| Siam   |            | 3   |        |
| <b>Education Level</b>                                       |            |     |        |
| Up to secondary level  |            | 114 | (24.9) |
| Tertiary level   |            | 343 | (75.1) |
| <b>Currently further study</b>                               |            |     |        |
| No   |            | 431 | (94.3) |
| Yes  |            | 26  | (5.7)  |
| <b>Working Period</b>  |            |     |        |
| Less than or equal to 20 years                               |            | 269 | (58.9) |
| More than 20 years   |            | 188 | (41.1) |
| <b>Children under care</b>                                   |            |     |        |
| Less than 12 months old                                      |            | 1   | (0.2)  |
| 12 to 24 months old  |            | 2   | (0.4)  |
| 2 to 4 years old   |            | 230 | (50.3) |
| 5 to 6 years old   |            | 409 | (89.5) |
| <b>Ever reported case to authority</b>                       |            |     |        |
| No   |            | 456 | (99.8) |
| Yes  |            | 1   | (0.2)  |
| <b>Ever had training on child abuse</b>                      |            |     |        |
| No   |            | 368 | (80.5) |
| Yes  |            | 89  | (19.5) |
| <b>Number of training hours (n=89)</b>                       |            |     |        |
| Less than 10 hours   |            | 83  | (93.3) |
| 10 to 20 hours   |            | 4   | (4.5)  |
| More than 20 hours   |            | 2   | (2.2)  |
| <b>Ever received professional development training (PDT)</b> |            |     |        |
| No   |            | 73  | (16.0) |
| Yes  |            | 384 | (84.0) |
| <b>PDT helped in handle children abuse case (n= 384)</b>     |            |     |        |
| No   |            | 83  | (21.6) |
| Yes  |            | 301 | (78.4) |

only 26.5% of respondents answered they would notify the authorities, 39.7% said they would notify the school administration, and two of them said they would refrain from taking any action out of concern for reporting the matter incorrectly. The second vignette depicts a 4-year-old boy who sat on top and of a girl and rubbed himself against her while the girl was taking a nap. Only 4.2% of the respondents believed the situation was a sexual abuse and would report this act to the authorities. The majority (63%) would first inform the parents. For the third vignette, ECPs were quizzed on a situation in which a child in their classroom was dropped off by a parent who

**Table 2.** Intention to report suspected case of child abuse to the authorities among ECPs (n=457).

| Intention to report to the authority | n (%)      |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| No                                   | 267 (58.4) |
| Yes                                  | 190 (41.6) |

smelt of alcohol, and appeared to be intoxicated most mornings, which is an example of suspected neglect. Only 17.7% of the respondents said they would notify the authorities. However, nearly half (46.6%) of the respondents would submit a report to the school administration. Three ECPs (0.7%) would not take any action because no physical injury is visible, only the child's self-reported (33.3%) and fear that their report would be wrong (66.7%). The fourth vignette dealt with physical abuse. According to the scenario, a child in their class frequently suffered from unexplained burns, bites, and bruises. All respondents would act in this situation.

**Table 3.** Intention to report suspected case of child abuse among ECPs according to vignettes (n=457).

| Response  | V1  |        | V2  |        | V3  |        | V4  |        |
|---|-----|--------|-----|--------|-----|--------|-----|--------|
|   | n   | (%)    | n   | (%)    | n   | (%)    | n   | (%)    |
| Report to authorities   | 121 | (26.5) | 19  | (4.2)  | 81  | (17.7) | 105 | (23.0) |
| Report to school administration   | 181 | (39.7) | 126 | (27.5) | 213 | (46.6) | 198 | (43.3) |
| Defer decision to report to school administration (i.e. director, school counsellor). | 2   | (0.4)  | 3   | (0.7)  | 1   | (0.2)  | 3   | (0.7)  |
| Wait for more obvious, clear, convincing evidence of abuse/neglect.                   | 54  | (11.8) | 17  | (3.7)  | 15  | (3.3)  | 48  | (10.5) |
| Speak to parents or stepfather.   | 97  | (21.2) | 288 | (63.0) | 144 | (31.5) | 103 | (22.5) |
| Don't report, take no action.   | 2   | (0.4)  | 4   | (0.9)  | 3   | (0.7)  | 0   | (0)    |

However, only 23.0% of ECPs would report to the authorities, while 43.3% would report to school the administration. (Table 3).

### Factors associated with the intention to report child abuse to the authority among ECPs in Kelantan

Only knowledge score was a significant factor, according to simple and multiple binary logistic regression ( $p < 0.05$ ). An increment of 1 knowledge score had 1.18 times the odds of having intention to report child abuse cases. Other factors were not significant (Table 4).

## DISCUSSION

According to our findings, less than half of ECPs intended to report to the authorities a possible incidence

**Table 4.** Factors associated with intention to report to the authority suspected case of child abuse analyzed by simple and multiple binary logistic regression (n=457).

| Variables  | Crude OR (95% CI)  | p value | Adjusted OR (95% CI) | p value      |
|--|--------------------|---------|----------------------|--------------|
| <b>Knowledge score</b>                                 | 1.17 (1.06 – 1.29) | 0.002   | 1.18 (1.07 – 1.30)   | <b>0.001</b> |
| <b>Attitude score</b>                                  | 1.02 (0.97 – 1.08) | 0.392   |                      |              |
| <b>Age</b>   | 0.99 (0.98 – 1.01) | 0.580   |                      |              |
| <b>Education level</b>                                 |                    |         |                      |              |
| Up to secondary level                                  | 1.12 (0.73 – 1.73) | 0.599   |                      |              |
| Tertiary level   |                    |         |                      |              |
| <b>Working period</b>                                  |                    |         |                      |              |
| Less than or equal to 20 years                         | 1.34 (0.92 – 1.95) | 0.131   |                      |              |
| More than 20 years                                     |                    |         |                      |              |
| <b>Tending to children aged 2-4 years old</b>          |                    |         |                      |              |
| No   | 0.73 (0.50 – 1.06) | 0.102   |                      |              |
| Yes  |                    |         |                      |              |
| <b>Tending to children aged 5-6 years old</b>          |                    |         |                      |              |
| No   | 0.82 (0.45 – 1.50) | 0.527   |                      |              |
| Yes  |                    |         |                      |              |
| <b>Training on child abuse</b>                         |                    |         |                      |              |
| No   | 0.84 (0.52 – 1.35) | 0.472   |                      |              |
| Yes  |                    |         |                      |              |
| <b>Ever received professional development training</b> |                    |         |                      |              |
| No   | 0.84 (0.51 – 1.39) | 0.493   |                      |              |
| Yes  |                    |         |                      |              |

OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence intervals;

of child abuse. In fact, after examining the results of our study for each of the scenario, the percentages of intention to report were much lower, with less than 30% of respondents in all four vignettes intended to report a suspected incidence of abuse to the authorities. The authority in this case refers to the police or Department of Social Welfare within the local setting. Only 0.18 percent of child abuse cases in Malaysia were reported by ECPs to the Department of Social Welfare.<sup>18</sup> According to a Malaysian study, less than half of primary school teachers in Selangor favoured laws requiring mandatory reporting for teachers. This demonstrates that many of them were not prepared to take on the responsibility. However, the majority of them would disclose such occurrence if it was mandated.<sup>8</sup> Less than half of ECPs in our study had intentions to report the cases to the school administrators in all scenarios of abuse. In America, more than 60% of ECPs chose to report to the school administrator before reporting to the authority, despite being more comfortable

with the responsibility to report.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, there were several ECPs in our study who chose neither making any report nor taking any action towards the cases of abuse presented in the scenarios. A reluctance to report may be related to a silence-community culture.<sup>8,21</sup> This attitude might be induced by taboo surrounding certain issues of abuse especially sexual abuse and fear that it will tarnish their relationships with the family.<sup>15,21</sup>

Similar to prior studies, our study revealed a substantial relationship between knowledge and the intention to notify the authorities.<sup>22</sup> Although experience of attending training on child abuse was not a significant factor in our study, it has been demonstrated in other studies that appropriate training would increase ECPs' knowledge and enable them to report instances of child abuse.<sup>23</sup> The confidence and morale of mandated reporters are boosted by training, which also boosts reporting rate of child abuse.<sup>24</sup> More than 80% of participants in our study had never attended any training specifically on child abuse, which could account for statistically insignificant link between training and reporting intentions. In all 93.3% of those who received training remembered receiving less than 10 hours of training while serving. Within a year of their service, ECPs in Malaysia were required to attend an Early Childhood Care and Education Course.<sup>25</sup> The 144-hour training includes a 40-hour practical module that covers themes pertaining to the safety and health of children in the facility. Unfortunately, the module contains no material on child abuse. In Taiwan, although childcare providers already have formal pre-service and in-service training courses on child abuse, they also complained about receiving insufficient training on the subject.<sup>26</sup>

Although there was no association between the attitude and the intention to report child abuse in our study, it is important to note that knowledge and attitude are interconnected.<sup>27</sup> Knowledge and belief cannot be separated because belief would shape a person's attitude.<sup>27,28</sup> In contrast, other studies found an association between attitude and reporting child abuse.<sup>10,14,26,29</sup>

In this study, the working experience was also not found to be associated with the intention to report child abuse.

Similar finding was reported by other studies.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, they reported that the longer the time an educator worked, the more negative experience they have with reporting child abuse.<sup>30</sup>

Education background was also not a significant factor in our study. However, a Malaysian study recorded education backgrounds influenced reporting child abuse cases. They found that those with a secondary level of education or lower have low knowledge about child abuse and thus translated into not reporting child abuse cases.<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study indicated that only a small proportion of ECPs intended to notify the authorities of child abuse. Their knowledge of child maltreatment was substantially correlated with their intention to report. These results underline the need of enhancing ECPs' knowledge to enable them to report any instance of child maltreatment. It justifies the requirement for an extensive module and integrated standard training on child abuse for ECPs in Malaysia. It might be conducted as a pre-service training, an annual refresher course, or a requirement for their career promotion. The module should include information on the definition and types of child abuse, signs and symptoms, reporting procedure, and legislation aspect of child abuse. A clear reporting guide or standard operating procedure to report child abuse should be in place. Mandated reporters should be informed of their duty and responsibility. Related laws and policies that are applicable to the reporters should be addressed as well as the implications of failure to report. Empowering ECPs with such knowledge is vital because they should take the lead in ending the cycle of abuse to protect the children. Our findings may also serve as a steppingstone to relevant stakeholders in making a move in improving our current policy on prevention and control of child abuse.

A larger-scale study involving ECPs from other government and private agencies as well as studies from other states with diverse ethnic groups is recommended in the future. A qualitative research to explore the barriers to reporting is also recommended.

## LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations to this study. The cross-sectional study design precludes drawing conclusions about the causal relationship. Only preschool ECPs from a single government agency were participating, thus limiting the generalizability of findings to all ECPs in Malaysia. The results may vary amongst agencies as the participants might be different in certain characteristics such as education level, exposure to training on child abuse and the standard operating procedure. The majority of respondents were females and Malays. Over-representation of a certain gender and ethnic group might not show the divergence of cultural values towards reporting child abuse and this will also limit the generalizability of findings. Additionally, this study relies on self-reporting, which could lead to social desirability bias. There are questions that require respondents to state their experience of not reporting a suspected case of child abuse which may seem intimidating by some respondents. Therefore, respondents might not give a true answer because of fear of getting caught red-handed. In addition respondents might give answers that they perceived in favour of the researcher. However, this study was conducted in an anonymous manner to minimise this bias.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD STATEMENT

Ethical approval was obtained from Malaysian National Medical Research Registry (ID number: NMRR-18-3034-44466), Research Ethics Committee (Human), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM/JEPeM/18100583) and the Director of Community Development Department in Kelantan.

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